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ON THE PROPOSED UNION OF CENTRAL AMERICA

In September, 1921, the first centenary of the Independence of Central America will be celebrated. On the 15th of that month, in the year 1821, the Spanish Colonial Captaincy General of Guatemala (including what are now the five Central American republics and the State of Chiapas, now irrevocably a part of Mexico) declared its entire freedom from Spain and from any and all other countries of the world, constituting itself a new free, autonomous, and sovereign political entity. The United States of Central America became fragmentary republics shortly after their independence, by reason of regional dissensions. Since then, through several periods of Central American history, union has been striven and even fought for, but unsuccessfully, owing to the opposition to it offered and maintained by the politico-military rulers of the various states, each jealous of the power of his brother presidents. It is, in the end, to this segregation of Central America, and, directly, to the petty kind of politics that such a condition alone has made possible there that the historian can trace every interstate war in Central America and also every revolution. Outside the Central American sphere, the different governments composing it have not had, except very slightly, any participation as active belligerents in wars or revolutions. Their conflicts have been local. They have at least had the wisdom to make trouble only among themselves and to keep those troubles at home. In uniting, all those troubles will cease for them.

It may be very properly asked what has been the attitude, the will even, of the Central American people in this question of the Union. There is only one answer. The people of Central America have always desired the union of their little republics. This desire has been very solemnly stated in each and every constitution enacted in Central America, and by virtue of this ideal a

citizen of any Central American country enjoys certain rights of citizenship in all the others of those five republics which are very properly denied to citizens of other countries. For instance, a Nicaraguan may become a citizen of Guatemala merely by fixing his residence in Guatemala and stating his willingness to become a Guatemalan. And so naturalized, he becomes invested with every right inherent to a born citizen of Guatemala even that of becoming, if chosen, the Chief Executive of the State, just as a man born in California can fix his residence in North Dakota and be, on that score, eligible to the Governorship of this latter State. The Central American regard for other Central Americans is that of a United States citizen of one State for the citizens of other States of the Union; for the vast majority of Central Americans earnestly desire the Union and know that a unity of tradition, of history, and of aspiration, a racial and religious unity, pervades and animates them all.

Another pertinent question arises at this point. Why, if such has been and is the attitude and the will of the people, has the Union not been made a fact? We have already partly answered this question. The jealousies among the military, despotic presidents of the different Central American countries, the desire of each of these leaders to become himself the president of the Federation, the stubborn selfishness of each in not being willing to yield his power as president except to assume a greater similar power; these have been the reason why the Union has not been made a fact.

Not until this year has Central America freed itself from that kind of enthroned ruler; dictatorships of many years' duration have been, until this day, the rule there. And these petty tyrants always gave as primal reason for their abstaining from the formation of one single Central American republic, the opposition of the United States of America to that idea.

The United States of America, the people of Central America were told, would not recognize the Central American Federation. All work for that ideal was therefore futile. And this doctrine easily gained ground on the predicated strength that Washington, minded imperialistically, preferred the segregation

of Central America in order to absorb it, in the weakness of its disunion, all the more easily.

It is this and this only, an all-sufficing explanation for every manner of America interference in Central America, that has bred in those ardent latitudes the unquestionable anti-American feeling existing there. This feeling is not unknown in the United States; it has been felt; it has been looked upon with apprehension. During the war with Germany, despite the fact that all the Central American governments had either declared war with Germany or officially come out as neutrals but favoring the United States, Central America was watched closely as a possible source of mischief.

On general grounds, is it at all desirable for a nation to have friends anywhere whom it cannot trust? More specifically, is it wise conduct for the United States to maintain so near its Canal (and consider all that the Canal can mean to the United States at war) a people living in hatred of the United States, a hatred that that people regard as righteous and patriotic? Is it not good and advisable—certainly a thing conducive to no embroilment anywhere—for the United States to show in a frank and noble manner its real attitude towards the Union of Central America, declaring conclusively that it will place no obstacle to the consummation of Central American patriotism?

Let this so easy a thing be done, and Central Americans will have no reason for cherishing, as now they cherish, an anti-American sentiment. And I would say, do even more.

I have affirmed that not until this year has Central America been out of the direct control of selfish and ambitious petty rulers. Now for the first time in Central American history, the presidents of Central America are men mindful of the constitutions of their countries and respectful to the will of the people they govern. The new President of Guatemala was acclaimed unanimously on a Unionist program. The President of El Salvador has recently invited the governments of the other Central American republics to a conference this autumn to discuss the Federation. All the Central American governments have responded to that invitation declaring in favor of the Union.

They cannot, they dare not, declare otherwise. But the evil of the petty, selfish, secession-promoters is not quite extinguished; its force is not altogether crushed. That evil is still working underhandedly. It is strong enough through astute and shiftily political machinations, to make all Union efforts this fall become mere sham and to bring the dishonor of a ridiculous defeat to the Union cause.

Small questions of no vital importance, of no material consequence, will arise to undo the higher purpose of that conference; questions such as where will the Capital City of the Federation be situated, in which of the States. And petty rivalries on this point will be fomented. Again, arguments against the Union will be brought forth based on the fear lest any of the States become a Prussia to the others. And so, *ad infinitum*, the self-same difficulties, the very troublous questions almost that made the founders of this great and most successful Federation repair behind closed doors to forge indissolubly the Union of these States when they wrote the Constitution.

What I would ask of the United States, therefore, is not only to state in unmistakable language that it admits no impediment to the marriage of true minds in Central America, but that furthermore, it earnestly invites the Central American conference to sit in Washington (where a similar conference, that which established the Central American Peace Court, sat in 1907). Here the Central American statesmen, assembled to discuss the Union of their countries, will find that freedom from local clamor and pressure and that calm that Washington and his fellow-makers of this Union sought behind closed doors; and here too, American advice and help, the guidance of a sincere, experienced, elder brother, will be at that conference's disposal when and if solicited in the course of the settlement of any question which may arise to puzzle the conference.

The time is now. The aid proposed, of the United States to the people of Central America, cannot be a nobler one. Of the material benefits that would accrue from this to American business and industry in Central America, it is unnecessary to speak. Besides, it is precisely in the United States that the financial

aspect of the Central American Federation, the distribution or consolidation of the existing Central American foreign debts, must be settled. Born, as it were, from the loins of the United States in Dionysiac fashion, the new Federation of Central America cannot but be in a very high sense a child of this country. Central America will honor that parentage.

SALOMÓN DE LA SELVA.

Washington, D. C., August 9, 1920.